

THE RELIGION OF HUMANITY AND ITS HIGH PRIESTESS.

BY JOHANNÈS GROS.*

“SHE will be your Egeria, your Beatrice, your Laura; attribute to her memory the new developments of your doctrine; consecrate her memory; inscribe it in the front of your books; entwine her name with yours.” And this indeed has he done for her whom he called “his eternal companion.” Their names are indissolubly joined in the adoration of the faithful. They are alike first high priest and first priestess. Without considering how much of generous illusion there was in this posthumous beatification, this modern Egeria was so intimately associated with the growing destinies of the new religion that to-day, fifty years after the death of its founder, when we wish to evoke the memory of Auguste Comte, it is the image of Clotilde de Vaux which is recalled to our memory.

One day in the month of October, 1844, when Comte had been separated from his wife for two years, he saw “at the home of her parents for the first time a young lady who was as irreproachable as she was charming.” We do not know certainly to what chance he owes this meeting; probably the introduction was given by a brother of Clotilde with whom Comte was acquainted at that time. Mlle. Marie de Ficquelmont† married about 1838 (but against her own will) a certain M. de Vaux, employed, I believe, in a bank. Soon afterwards he became a defaulter and was condemned to hard labor. The young wife was at once affected by the injustice of a law which would not permit her to repudiate a name thus branded with fire, and was obliged to withdraw into a retreat to which she was further compelled by her slender resources. Her family lived in the Rue Pavée, so she took her meals with them and in the

* Translated from the French manuscript by Lydia Gillingham Robinson.

† The family name of her father was Marie, but she usually used it in connection with her mother's name, de Ficquelmont.

evening returned home to a very modest lodging nearby in the Rue Payenne.

Born at Paris on April 3, 1815, Clotilde had completed her twenty-ninth year when Comte made her acquaintance. Has she preserved that eighteenth century grace which we see in an earlier portrait? All the features of that perfectly oval face possess great delicacy and recall the manner of Greuze. There is the same freshness in the brilliancy of the skin, the same outline in the lips, the broad forehead shaded by bands of hair which are drawn into a knot on her graceful neck prolonged in the sloping lines of her shoulders. Her eyes are slightly almond-shaped, her glance is calm and though somewhat melancholy seems to veil a smile. The expression of the face is a combination of seriousness and gentleness in which both the naive abandon of the child and the ingenuousness of the maiden are apparent. Already Clotilde felt the stroke of the disease which was to close her life. However, it is the characteristic of certain illnesses that they seem to enhance the charm of the face by giving it a sort of transparency so that the soul seemed to radiate from the skin. Thus the misfortune which had broken the health of a body naturally frail, could not alter a beauty whose brilliancy was but the radiance of a serene soul.

It is natural that Clotilde should have been more capable than another woman of appreciating the devotion of a distinguished thinker because she also undertook to provide for herself by the aid of literature. For his part Comte had never ceased to deplore his unfortunate marriage, and was quite ready to form a union with a woman who could reanimate in him "the play of tender affections," necessary, he said, both for his personal happiness and for the accomplishment of his social well-being. Chance assigned him Madame de Vaux.

The ensuing relations between them hardly commenced until April, 1845, but from that time they were of practically daily occurrence. Comte who was very precise and systematic about everything had from the first taken Mondays and Fridays as the days for calling at the home of the Marie de Ficquelmonts. Meanwhile Clotilde would sometimes gratify him by another visit at his home in the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince,—and the post took charge of the rest. Within the single year during which this idyl lasted, 181 letters were exchanged, which were published by the philosopher's request after his death.

An idyl! It was no fault of Comte's that this sudden and violent affection, by which he was seized from the very first, was not shared

by Madame de Vaux, for he could not take up his pen without giving expression to his feelings. "Since, alas! I do not know how to be-



AUGUSTE COMTE.

come younger, would that you, oh Madame, were less beautiful and

less lovable!" Once when speaking to her of his relatives he ventured farther: "I was about to say *our* relatives." Clotilde became



CLOTILDE DE VAUX.

alarmed and pleaded her inexperience in such matters. They laid

down no strict limitations for themselves; it was only arranged between them that they should "rule out embarrassing conversation." "Let us only talk about our heads," she added. Thus two weeks passed, until one day Clotilde published in the *National* a novelette entitled "Lucie." Comte recognized that the pitiful lot of the heroine of this little romance was none other than that of his friend who up to this time had told him almost nothing of her past. His love for Madame de Vaux became more intense and he dedicated to her the rest of his life. Clotilde warded him off, and was even somewhat angry: "I will be your friend always if you wish, but never anything more," but it made no difference. Notwithstanding her attitude Comte had already established a domestic worship of which Clotilde was the goddess. He arranged the arm chair in which she sat when she visited him, as an altar, and knelt before it night and morning invoking her with ardent prayers as the one to whom he owed his moral regeneration.

One more bond occurred, however, to cement their friendship. On August 28 they both stood at the baptismal font as sponsors for a child born in the de Ficquelmont family. In the eyes of Comte this ceremony sealed his "spiritual marriage" with his "angelic Clotilde." It was to be his lot, however, to approach still nearer to happiness. Some days afterward, September 5 in fact, Clotilde wrote him: "Since my misfortunes my one dream has been that of motherhood, but I have always promised myself never to unite in this step with any man who was not exceptionally worthy to comprehend its significance. If you think that you can accept all the responsibilities belonging to family life let me know, and I will consider it on my part." "It was with the greatest effort, my Clotilde, that I was able to control myself yesterday from answering your divine letter as soon as I had reread it upon my knees before your altar." The answer continues in this vein. Alas, his joy was short lived! Two days afterward Clotilde retracted her promise. "Pardon my imprudence," she wrote to the unhappy philosopher, "I still feel that I am powerless to exceed the limits of affection." It is in vain that he insists,—oh, not at all with the tenderness and cajoleries of the usual lover, but with an unyielding and precise logic clad severely in the abstract and colorless style which was so characteristic of Comte. She has but one reply: "I am not capable of giving myself without love. This is a demand which you ought not to make of me."

This crisis did not change the feelings of Comte. He assumed his rôle of a hopeless lover and continued to love; and to love with the secret hope that one day, perhaps a day yet far distant (but let

him keep at least the hope of this happiness!) she would consent to a union based upon pure friendship. When he positively knew that he must renounce this hope, this was his cry, not very lyrical to be sure, but listen: "This memorable episode has nevertheless made me feel bitterly how much the chasm which yawns between us is due to my want of youth and beauty." It is true that he was forty-eight years old and had never been either handsome or even attractive.

Existence then resumed its monotonous trend. The difficulties which arose within the family, the hard work of an author's profession when Clotilde tried it without success, bruised the last bit of strength which still sustained this delicate creature. Winter came and Clotilde's cough grew worse and worse. The new year opened with a springlike day. "The beautiful sunshine will make me well," she writes on January 2; "if you would like I will come to see you to-morrow, my dear friend, instead of receiving you here." Her visits became less and less frequent. She was often confined to her bed, and in the intervals of rest which her illness granted her she worked upon a long novel which she was never to finish. Her last letter is dated Sunday, March 8. Foreseeing, perhaps, the decree which destiny had pronounced upon her she says: "I wonder if some day you will not call me to account for these violent interruptions of your public life." Four weeks later to the very day, on Sunday, April 5, at half past three in the afternoon, she passed away, with Comte present to the last.

The intimate code of worship which the founder of positivism dedicated to her whom he henceforth referred to only as his "noble and tender wife," is generally known. From the second day after her funeral, that is to say on Good Friday, April 10, 1846, he established for his personal use daily prayers for morning, mid-day and evening, intended to commemorate an eternal and everlasting love. These prayers were said before the "altar" of Clotilde where reposed her "relics," the letters of his beloved, a lock of her hair and a bouquet of artificial flowers which she had made,—relics which received from the devotees of the new faith a veneration equal to that of Christians for relics of the Holy Cross. On Wednesday of each week with only one exception Comte knelt in the Père Lachaise cemetery at the tomb of his beloved. Finally every year along about St. Clotilde's day he wrote long "Confessions" in which he related the principal events of his public and private life for the past twelve months; then he would read these at the grave stone.

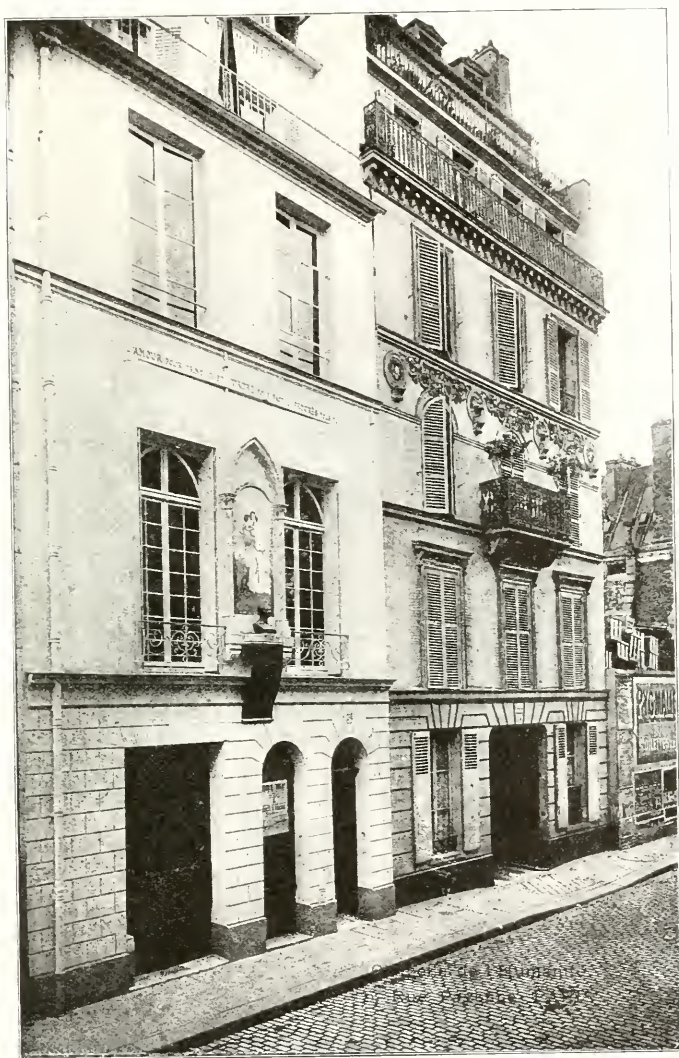
In Comte's opinion these annual confessions formed a progressive systematization of public worship which he wished to consecrate to

his Clotilde. I can do no better here than to quote: "Since the third anniversary of thy death I have thus been able to celebrate at the same time both thine unalterable rebirth and my final purification. Our expansion in the future from year to year will specially consecrate our full identification with the result of the religious foundation in which thou hast rendered me such great assistance. Under these positive auspices I have solemnly systematized during the last year thine irrevocable incorporation into the true 'Grand-Being' (Humanity). These successive preparations have brought me to-day to the point of finally establishing thine actual worship. To be henceforth inseparable from universal religion." On the seventh St. Clotilde's day he inaugurated "her universal adoration"; on the tenth, "her regular festival," etc. Faithful to their master's will, the disciples continued to honor in her the first priestess of the religion of Humanity of which Comte had been anointed high priest, and in her image to adore the positivist Virgin. The symbol of Humanity likewise was represented with the features of Clotilde.

Although Paris was the birthplace of the new religion sixty-three years ago, it has only possessed one temple of Humanity until very recently. We know that during his lifetime Comte had asked that the Pantheon should be appropriated for the cult which he had founded. As yet his last residence at No. 10 Rue Monsieur-le-Prince has been the only spot where the positivists of Paris gathered together for their rituals and ceremonies, but about two years ago a group of Brazilians acquired possession of the house where Clotilde de Vaux died and established there, while awaiting a higher destiny, a modest positivist temple which has not yet been opened for services.

At No. 5 Rue Payenne in the Marais quarter of Paris, there stands a little house of a somewhat distinguished appearance, which by a very distinctive style of decoration of its façade can not fail to attract the attention of the passerby. Framed in an archway between the two windows of the first floor there stands a picture where an artist evidently but little familiar with the customs of symbolism has painted a woman holding in her arms a child,—Humanity extending her guardianship over each of us. At the side the following inscription may be read: "Virgin Madre, figlia del tuo figlio." Between the first and second stories there is this inscription: "L'amour pour principe, l'ordre pour base, et le progrès pour but" (Love for principle, order for foundation, and progress for our aim). Above the entrance stands a bronze bust of Auguste Comte and a commemorative plaque to "Charlotte Clotilde Joséphine, fille de Hen-

riette-Joséphine de Ficquelmont, et de Joseph Marie, née à Paris le 3 Avril 1815, est morte le 5 Avril 1846, au 3^{me} étage de cette maison." (Charlotte Clotilde Josephine, daughter of Henriette Josephine de



TEMPLE OF HUMANITY.

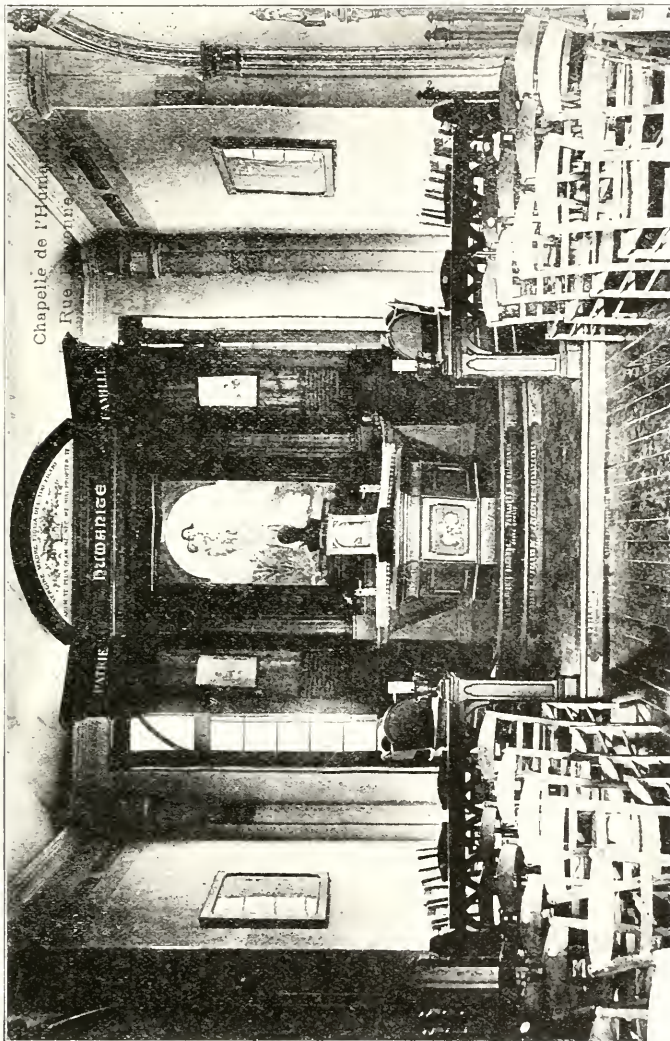
Ficquelmont and of Joseph Marie, born at Paris April 3, 1815, died April 5, 1846, on the third floor of this house). Finally a large

green flag floating from the top floor bears these words: "Ordre et progrès."

Advancing through a narrow passageway the traveler comes to a little interior court from which a stairway leads to the first floor. Here is the chapel,—a tiny room with a wooden floor and differing but little from Catholic chapels in its general effect with its rows of chairs and its altar. At the end of the room stands the altar of polished walnut and traditional in form; nothing is lacking but cross and candles. Some stalls intended no doubt for the officiating priests are arranged around the sides. In place of the tabernacle stands the bust of Comte and below the altar are three panels; in the center the portrait of Clotilde symbolizing Humanity; at the left Comte's mother dedicating her son to Humanity; the panel on the right has not yet been placed but is to represent Comte on his death-bed. The mural paintings are portraits of thirteen types of humanity, whose names have been given to the months of the positivist calendar and who are, respectively, Moses, Homer, Aristotle, Archimedes, Cæsar, St. Paul, Charlemagne, Dante, Gutenberg, Shakespeare, Descartes, Frederick, Bichat. The daily commemoration of great men constitutes in some sort the concrete part of the new cult which is well enough known so that we may limit ourselves to a short survey.

A careful distinction must be made between the private and public worship. The private worship is personal and domestic. In its personal aspect it is characterized by the institution of guardian angels, which positivism has adopted from Catholicism but somewhat transformed. The guardian angel of the positivist is more nearly analogous to the domestic gods of antiquity. He ceases to be a temporary protector common to all people and impersonal, in order to be particularly chosen as the faithful guardian in the center of the family. Prayer is the form which this part of the worship takes. The private worship is domestic inasmuch as it is nothing but the consecration of the principal phases of every-day life. Nine social sacraments suffice to characterize all these phases; first, the sacrament of Presentation, or baptism; then the Initiation administered in the fourteenth year (when the education is transferred from the mother to the systematic education of the priest); Admission, at the age of twenty-one when the studies are finished and the young man must think of entering into the actual service of Humanity; seven years afterward the sacrament of Destination confirms him in a career which is to some extent irrevocable. At this point, but never before, he may think of receiving the sacrament of Marriage (Positivist marriage is characterized by the obligation never to

marry again); at forty-two years of age the positivist receives the sacrament of Maturity; at sixty years that of Retreat; upon his death-bed that of Transformation, and finally seven years after death that of Incorporation. After this length of time it is possible for society



INTERIOR OF THE TEMPLE OF HUMANITY.

with equity to pass a judgment which will decide irrevocably the dead man's fate. "After the priest has pronounced the Incorporation he presides over the ceremonial transportation of the sanctified relics which, placed hitherto in the civic field, are now to occupy

their everlasting resting-place which surrounds the temple of Humanity. Each tomb is adorned with a simple inscription, a bust, or a statue, according to the degree of glorification obtained. As to exceptional cases of unworthiness, the stigma is manifest by bearing the funeral burden to the desert of reprobates, among beggars, suicides and dualists."

The public worship is much more abstract and in eighty-one annual festivals reviews the universal adoration of Humanity. It is intended first to consecrate "the fundamental ties" of our existence in social relationships: humanity, marriage, parenthood, sonship, brotherhood and domesticity; then the preparatory states which have characterized our evolution, that is, fetishism, polytheism and monotheism; finally "the normal functions" of regenerated society as positivism conceives it. These are Woman or Moral Providence, Priest or Intellectual Providence, Patrician or Material Providence, Proletariat or Providence in general.

Public worship assumes a more concrete form in the symbol of the positivist trinity, "the eternal and definite object of its highest adoration." This trinity is composed of the Grand Being or Humanity, the Grand Fetish or Earth, and the Grand Environment or Space.

It is part of this religion to strive to maintain the systematic commemoration of the past and to point out the successful development which the historical spirit and the feeling of continuity owe to it. From the intellectual point of view (independently of what we still owe to positive philosophy with regard to method) the influence of the cult organized by Auguste Comte is very great, but from the ethical point of view its doctrine cannot have more than an ephemeral success. For a long time yet positivism will be able to dwell within a chapel; it will never be transformed into a Church. Apostles have lived; their age is past; they are the result of a certain moral atmosphere in which faith is supreme. To-day there is no longer enough faith to bring forth an apostle, much less a religion. Because of heredity and the education which still continues along its line, the Christian religion has thrust its roots so deeply into the races of Europe and other countries where Europeans can become acclimated, that it has survived the faith which gave it birth. This is only one case where custom has survived the original motive. But fortified cities and courts of assize have yielded on all sides, and the walls which still stand by the force of inertia will not be able to conceal the approaching ruin of the entire edifice, and the builders of the first hour, those who knew the secret of the cathedral, will not be there to raise it from its ruins.

Christian thought has not been able to realize the perpetuity of dogma, and the laity to-day will have still less chance. Wherever we touch, ideas themselves advance; if we resist them they will bear us with them. No creed will be able to stop their progress. This was Comte's mistake; it was also the mistake of the entire philosophy of the nineteenth century that it should pretend to determine the ultimate term which would rally together the minds of all and would establish them forever in the narrow formula of a scientific dogma.

Nevertheless we must take into account our curiosity and our need of literary emotions. I know some who would never have entered into the religion of Humanity except through Clotilde de Vaux. So great is the power of sentiment and of legend!